



# Public Concern about Education in 2016: What the Numbers Say

By Frederick M. Hess and Kelsey Hamilton

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## KEY POINTS

- *Going back a quarter century to 1992, our last three presidents all made education an integral issue of their campaigns. However, education has been largely absent during the 2016 presidential contest.*
- *Why is education not drawing much attention? First, for most people, education is not as urgent as national security and the economy. Second, much of education's prominence in previous elections is actually candidate driven rather than in response to public outcry.*
- *Inattention to education in the presidential election is pretty normal. Education is likely to receive much more attention when the political world shifts from campaigning and back to governing.*

As primary season commences, education has been largely absent during this year's presidential contest. Slate writer Laura Moser noted, "You might have noticed something: None of the candidates are talking about education. Like, at all."<sup>1</sup> Nina Rees, the head of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, lamented in *US News & World Report*, "Candidates on both sides of the aisle have said distressingly little about K-12 education."<sup>2</sup> *Education Week's* Andrew Ujifusa has observed, "So far, in both the Republican and Democratic debates, only one direct question has been asked about K-12 policy."<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, after the overheated educational efforts that marked the Bush and Obama presidencies, many may regard this benign neglect as a relief. On the other hand, it does seem to be a break with recent history.

Going back a quarter century to 1992, our last three presidents all made their thinking on

education an integral part of their persona. They did this well before the first primary ballots were cast. Each used education in symbolically potent ways. For George W. Bush, it was a way to demonstrate a real commitment to equal opportunity. For Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, it was a way to talk about new public spending in terms of investment and personal responsibility and to distinguish it from old-style tax-and-spend liberalism. Clearly that is not going to be the case this time around—and that may say as much about the public and what it wants as it does about the candidates and their agendas.

Despite sporadic Democratic paeans to free college and pre-K and occasional Republican denunciations of the Common Core and philosophy degrees, it seems education has occupied only a very modest place so far in this election year. That is certainly the sentiment of many observers. But is that impression accurate?

# What the Public Says

It is fairly easy to gauge. Every month in 2015, Gallup asked respondents, “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” The same question was asked five times by *New York Times*/CBS and four times by CBS. Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, the national polling repository, reports on its online database that these were the only national pollsters to have asked this question multiple times in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 reports the results of these 21 polls.

Of the 21 polls that asked about the nation’s most important problem, the high point for education (including K–12, higher education, and pre-K) came last February when 7 percent of respondents deemed it the nation’s most important problem. Overall, 5 percent of respondents named education as the nation’s top problem in just 6 of the 21 surveys.

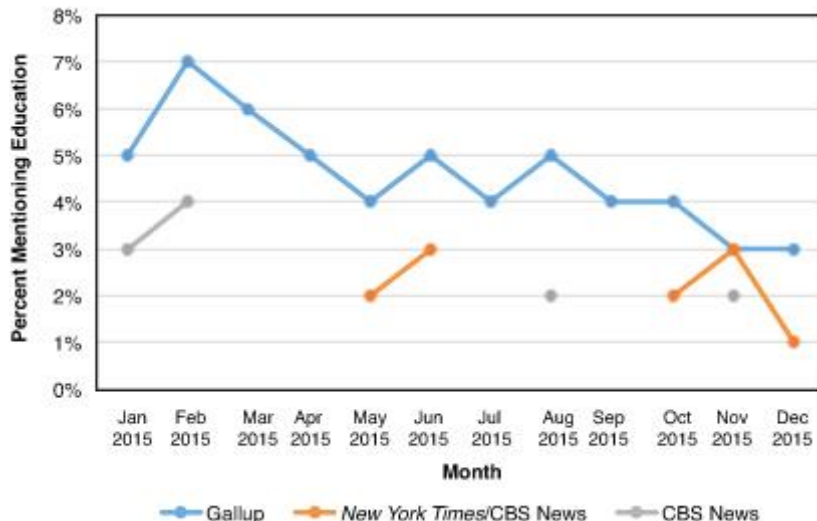
Not only has education not drawn much attention this cycle but also the modest number of voters mentioning it has gradually inched downward. From January through June 2015, 4.4 percent of respondents, on average, said education was the nation’s most important problem. From July through December 2015, the comparable figure was 3 percent.

But how low are those numbers, really? How do they stack up against the other issues named as the nation’s most important problem? One easy way to examine that is to see where education ranks relative to other issues.

Table 1 shows that education finished as high as fifth in early 2015. Since May, however, it has been seventh or lower in 14 of 15 polls. Of the eight polls conducted after Labor Day, it ranked 10th or lower five times.

If not education, what other issues are attracting attention? In December, Gallup’s top four (in order) were terrorism, dissatisfaction with government, the economy, and guns. In November, they were the economy, dissatisfaction with government, immigration and illegal aliens, and unemployment/jobs. Those kinds of responses are pretty consistent across the three polls and over time.

**Figure 1. Percent of Respondents Naming Education in 2015 Polls**



Source: Gallup Polls, January–December 2015; *New York Times*/CBS News Poll, December 4–8, 2015; and CBS News Polls, January, February, August, and November 2015.

**Table 1. Where Education Ranks in 2015 Polls**

Month	Gallup	New York Times/CBS	CBS News
January 2015	8th	N/A	5th
February 2015	6th	N/A	5th
March 2015	6th	N/A	N/A
April 2015	7th	N/A	N/A
May 2015	9th	9th	N/A
June 2015	6th	11th	N/A
July 2015	8th	N/A	N/A
August 2015	6th	N/A	13th
September 2015	9th	N/A	N/A
October 2015	10th	10th	N/A
November 2015	9th	9th	13th
December 2015	13th	16th	N/A

Source: Gallup Polls, January–December 2015; *New York Times*/CBS News Poll, December 4–8, 2015; and CBS News Polls, January, February, August, and November 2015.

## How Does 2016 Stack Up to Recent Elections?

Education seems to rank relatively low among public concerns this year. How big of a change is that from other recent elections? It turns out, it is not actually all that surprising or unusual. In truth, the public rarely rates education highly when ranking the nation's most important problems.

Since 2000, both Gallup and the *New York Times/CBS* have asked the public, "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents who named education this year and in each of the past four presidential election cycles. For 2000 through 2012, the result is for the last poll conducted before the election; for 2016, it is from the December 2015 poll.

As Figure 2 makes clear, an average of 2 percent of respondents regard education as the nation's biggest problem in the last month of 2015. That is about the same as in 2004 and 2008 and down only modestly from 4 percent in 2012.<sup>5</sup> The massive outlier is the Bush-Gore election of 2000, when an average of 10 percent named education. Since 2000, there has not been a year

**Table 2. Where Education Ranks in Presidential Election Years**

Year	Gallup	<i>New York Times/CBS</i>
2000	1st	4th
2004	15th	9th
2008	9th	15th
2012	9th	5th
2016	13th	16th

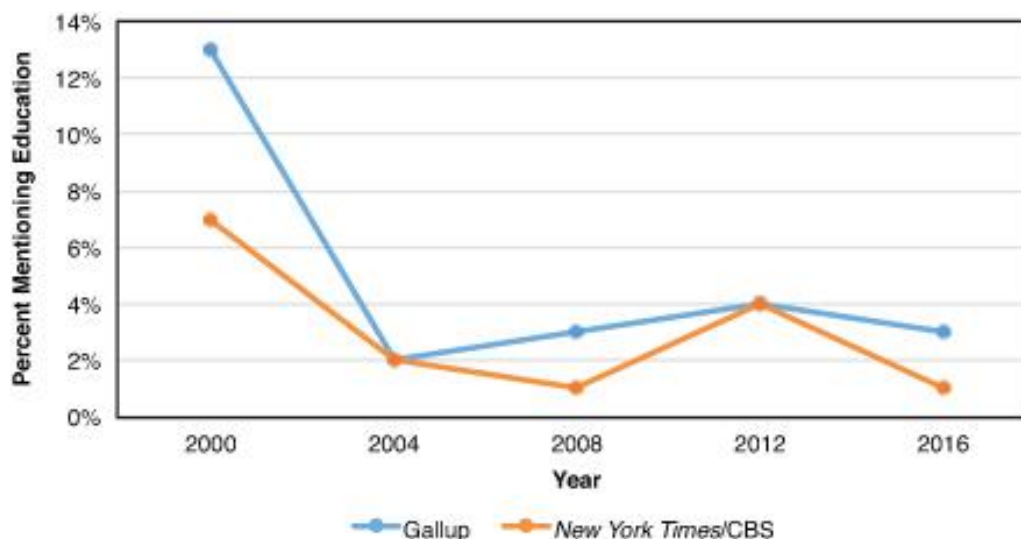
Source: Gallup Polls, December 2015, November 2012, November 2008, November 2004, and October 2000; and *New York Times/CBS* News Polls, December 2015, May 2012, March 2008, November 2004, and November 1999.

when even 5 percent of respondents thought education was the nation's biggest problem.

Another way to look at these numbers is to ask where education ranked relative to other issues in each year. Table 2 shows the results.

In 2000, Gallup found education to be the public's top concern, and *New York Times/CBS* found it to be fourth—although when excluding catchall categories such as "Other" and "Don't Know," it ranks second. After 2000, education's prominence fell precipitously. Between 2004 and

**Figure 2. Percent of Respondents Naming Education in Presidential Election Years**



Source: Gallup Polls, December 2015, November 2012, November 2008, November 2004, and October 2000; and *New York Times/CBS* News Polls, December 2015, May 2012, March 2008, November 2004, and November 1999.

2012, education ranked higher than 9th in just one poll, while finishing 9th in three and 15th in two others. This year, Gallup currently has education at 13th, and *New York Times*/CBS has it at 16th.

In short, since 2000, education has not been high on the public's radar. At various times, attention has instead been devoted to issues such as the Iraq war in 2004, unemployment and the housing crisis in 2008, and terrorism and government dissatisfaction this year.

The fascinating question is what happened in 2000—and after. The simplest explanation is that, in those days before 9/11 or the bursting of tech bubble, a booming economy and tranquil world allowed voters to focus on things such as education, ethical lapses, crime, and health care. When things changed, education got pushed further back in the queue.

It is also true, of course, that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed in 2001. It may be that passage of NCLB helped to cool the nation's concern about education, although it seems a bit of a stretch.

## A Few Takeaways

Why is education not drawing much attention?

First, for most people, education is not as urgent as national security and the economy. At times such as these, when headlines are filled with stories of terrorism and stagnant wages, education faces a stiff headwind.

Second, concern about education in 2004, 2008, and 2012 seems to be out of alignment with how much Bush and Obama talked about education. That is because much of education's prominence is actually candidate driven rather than the product of candidates responding to a public outcry. Put another way, education has generally been how conservatives show themselves to be compassionate and how liberals show they are practical and responsible. This election, candidates face intense pressure on the left and the right to demonstrate that they are ideologically reliable—and education is less helpful on that count.

The bottom line is that education is unlikely to emerge as a significant issue over the next nine months. Moreover, for the first time since before the Clinton administration, it looks like America will elect a president who has not made education central to their persona or vision. That will obviously matter. But it is also true that inattention to education in the presidential election is pretty normal, and it should not be read to signal any change in the attention education is likely to receive when the political world shifts from campaigning and back to governing.

## About the Authors

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## Notes

1. Laura Moser, "Why Don't the Presidential Candidates Want to Talk about Education?" *Slate*, January 19, 2016, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/schooled/2016/01/19/2016\\_presidential\\_candidates\\_don\\_t\\_want\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_education\\_here\\_s.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/schooled/2016/01/19/2016_presidential_candidates_don_t_want_to_talk_about_education_here_s.html).
2. Nina Rees, "Put Charter Schools Back in the 2016 Debate," *US News & World Report*, January 19, 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2016-01-19/more-2016-candidates-need-to-talk-about-charter-schools>.
3. Andre Ujifusa, "K-12 Still Struggling for Traction as Campaign Issue," *Education Week*, January 12, 2016, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/01/13/k-12-still-struggling-for-traction-as-campaign.html>.
4. Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, <http://www.ropercenter.cornell.edu>.
5. These results are produced by averaging together the Gallup and the *New York Times*/CBS numbers.